

Understanding patient expectations: Key factors that drive patient loyalty and referrals in dentistry

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In today's competitive dental landscape, understanding what patients truly want is essential to building a successful, patient-centred practice. Patients now have more options than ever, and they're often seeking not just expert clinical care but a positive, holistic experience that meets their personal and practical needs. For dental practitioners, fulfilling these expectations can lead to higher patient satisfaction, stronger loyalty and valuable word-of-mouth referrals. Here are the key factors that influence patients to choose, return to and refer friends and family to their dental practitioner.

1. Transparent and clear communication

Patients are looking for transparency in both treatment options and costs. They want a practitioner who takes the time to explain procedures, answer questions and discuss potential outcomes. By fostering open and clear communication, practitioners can help patients feel more comfortable and confident in their choices.

Treatment explanations: Patients appreciate when dentists explain treatment options thoroughly, including the benefits, risks and alternatives. Breaking down complex dental jargon into understandable language can make a significant difference.

Cost transparency: Discussing costs upfront and being transparent about fees can help prevent misunderstandings

and financial anxiety. Clear communication about costs builds trust and reassures patients that they won't face unexpected expenses.

Follow-up support: Aftercare instructions and follow-up calls after significant treatments show patients that their health is a priority even after they leave the clinic. Patients value this level of attentiveness and care, which makes them more likely to return.

2. Personalised care and comfort

Patients are increasingly drawn to practices that offer a personalised, comfortable experience. This begins from the moment they enter the clinic and includes everything from the waiting room atmosphere to the attentiveness of the practitioner and staff.

Gentle and attentive care: Many patients have a fear of the dentist, so a gentle approach and sensitivity to patient discomfort is crucial. Practitioners who check in with patients during procedures and adjust their approach based on feedback are likely to be appreciated.

Individual attention: Personalised care, such as remembering a patient's preferences or following up on personal details shared in prior visits, helps patients feel valued and respected. Building this rapport can make the experience less clinical and more welcoming.



Anxiety reduction techniques: For patients with dental anxiety, offering options such as relaxation techniques, noise-cancelling headphones or even sedation can help them feel more at ease. Creating an environment that addresses patient comfort is a powerful differentiator in dental care.

3. Efficient appointment scheduling and minimal wait times

Busy patients value a practice that respects their time. Long wait times, difficulty scheduling appointments or unresponsive customer service are some of the most common reasons patients may leave a practice. Streamlined appointment processes can make a big difference.

Easy booking and appointment reminders: Online booking options and reminders via text or email make it convenient for patients to schedule and remember appointments. These options also reduce the likelihood of missed appointments.

Efficient time management: Minimising wait times in the clinic demonstrates respect for patients' schedules. If delays are unavoidable, informing patients ahead of time and giving them options can help alleviate frustration.

Flexible scheduling options: Offering flexible scheduling, including early morning, late evening or weekend appointments, can cater to patients with busy lives, making it easier for them to prioritise dental care.

4. High standards of cleanliness and infection control

Infection control and cleanliness are non-negotiable for most patients, especially in light of recent global health events. A clean, sanitary environment instils confidence and trust.

Visible hygiene practices: Patients feel reassured when they see hygienic practices in action, such as regular disinfection of surfaces, the use of protective gear and visibly clean instruments.

Covid-19 protocols: Adhering to Covid-19 safety protocols, such as wearing masks, providing hand sanitiser and social distancing in waiting areas, can help alleviate patient concerns and show commitment to their safety.

Consistent standards: Patients notice inconsistencies, so maintaining a high standard of cleanliness at all times is essential. Regularly communicating your practice's sanitation measures can reinforce patient trust.

5. A warm, welcoming environment

Patients who feel welcomed by friendly, empathetic staff are more likely to return. The atmosphere of the clinic, from the front desk to the dental chair, plays a significant role in shaping the patient's experience.

Professional and friendly staff: The attitude and demeanour of the staff, from the receptionist to the hygienist, can leave a lasting impression. Patients appreciate kindness, empathy and professionalism in every interaction.

Patient comfort amenities: Small touches such as a well-appointed waiting room with comfortable seating, soothing music or refreshments can make patients feel more relaxed and comfortable.

Empathy and patience: Patients can often feel nervous or self-conscious about their dental issues, so empathetic listening and a nonjudgmental approach can create a positive experience that encourages them to return.

6. Emphasis on preventive care and patient education

Patients are increasingly interested in learning how to maintain their oral health proactively. They value practitioners who educate them on preventive care and support them in making informed decisions about their dental health.

Preventive care plans: By offering preventive care plans or check-up reminders, practitioners can emphasise the importance of ongoing oral health, which benefits the patient and creates a steady flow of repeat visits.

Educational resources: Providing educational materials – such as brochures, blogs or videos on common dental topics – can empower patients and show that the practice cares about their overall wellbeing.

Encouraging healthy habits: Engaging patients with advice on brushing, flossing and other preventive measures helps them feel more in control of their health and shows that the practice is committed to long-term patient care, not just short-term treatments.

7. Leveraging patient feedback for continuous improvement

Inviting and acting on patient feedback can drive continuous improvement and demonstrate a commitment to quality care. Many patients appreciate a practice that listens to their suggestions and works to make improvements based on them.

Patient satisfaction surveys: Sending out post-appointment surveys or follow-up emails to collect feedback gives patients a chance to share their opinions and shows that their experiences are valued.

Online reviews and testimonials: Encouraging satisfied patients to leave positive online reviews can boost the practice's reputation and attract new patients. Responding to reviews, both positive and negative, with professionalism shows dedication to patient satisfaction.

Adapting based on feedback: Implementing changes based on feedback, such as reducing wait times or improving communication practices, signals that the practice is actively working to meet patient needs and improve service quality.

Conclusion: A patient-centred practice drives loyalty and growth

Meeting patient expectations in a dental practice goes beyond clinical expertise – it's about creating a patient-centred experience that promotes trust, comfort and satisfaction. Dental practitioners who prioritise transparency, comfort, convenience, cleanliness and education can set themselves apart, building stronger relationships with patients who feel respected, valued and cared for.

When patients have positive experiences, they're more likely to stay loyal, return for future visits and recommend the practice to others. In a field as personal as dentistry, building trust through thoughtful, patient-centred care can make all the difference in growing a successful, reputable practice.